

THE EVENING BEFORE MARRIAGE.

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN OF ZSCHOKKE.

"We shall certainly be very happy together!" said Louise to her aunt on the evening before her marriage, and her cheeks glowed with a deeper red, and her eyes shone with delight. When a bride says *we*, it may easily be guessed whom of all persons in the world she means thereby.

"I do not doubt it, dear Louise," replied her aunt, "see only that you *continue* happy together."

"Oh, who can doubt that we shall continue so! I know myself. I have faults, indeed, but my love for him will correct them. And so long as we love each other, we cannot be unhappy. Our love will never grow old."

"Alas!" sighed her aunt, "thou dost speak like a maiden of nineteen, on the day before her marriage, in the intoxication of wishes fulfilled, of fair hopes and happy omens. Dear child, remember this—*even the heart in time grows cold*. Days will come when the magic of the senses shall fade. And when this enchantment has fled, then it first becomes evident whether we are truly worthy of love. When custom has made familiar the charms that are most attractive, when youthful freshness has died away, and with the brightness of domestic life, more and more shadows have mingled, then, Louise, and not till then, can the wife say of the husband, 'He is worthy of love'; then, first, the husband say of the wife, 'She blooms in imperishable beauty.' But, truly, on the day before marriage, such assertions sound laughable to me."

"I understand you, dear aunt. You would say that our mutual virtues alone can in later years give us worth for each other. But is not he to whom I am to belong—for of myself I can boast nothing but the best intentions—is he not the worthiest, noblest of all the young men of the city? Blooms not, in his soul, every virtue that tends to make life happy?"

"My child," replied her aunt, "I grant it. Virtues bloom in thee as well as in him; I can say this to thee without flattery. But, dear heart, they bloom only, and are not yet ripened beneath the sun's heat and the shower. No blossoms deceive the expectations more than these. We can never tell in what soil they have taken root. Who knows the concealed depths of the heart?"

"Ah, dear aunt, you really frighten me."

"So much the better, Louise. Such fear is right, such fear is as it should be on the evening before marriage. I love thee tenderly, and will, therefore, declare all my thoughts on this subject without disguise. I am not as yet an old aunt. At seven and twenty years, one still looks forward into life with pleasure, the world still presents a bright side to us. I have an excellent husband. I am happy. Therefore, I have the right to speak thus to thee, and to call thy attention to a secret which perhaps thou dost not yet know, one which is not often spoken of to a young and pretty maiden, one, indeed, which does not greatly occupy the thoughts of a young

man, and still is of the utmost importance in every household: a secret from which alone spring lasting love and unalterable happiness."

Louise seized the hand of her aunt in both of hers. "Dear aunt! you know I believe you in everything. You mean, that enduring happiness and lasting love are not insured to us by accidental qualities, by fleeting charms, but only by those virtues of the mind which we bring to each other. These are the best dowry which we can possess; these never become old."

"As it happens, Louise. The virtues also, like the beauties of the body, can grow old, and become repulsive and hateful with age."

"How, dearest aunt! what it is you say? Name to me a virtue which can become hateful with years."

"When they have become so, we no longer call them virtues, as a beautiful maiden can no longer be called beautiful, when time has changed her to an old and wrinkled woman."

"But, aunt, the virtues are nothing earthly."

"Perhaps."

"How can gentleness and mildness ever become hateful?"

"So soon as they degenerate into insipid indolence and listlessness."

"And manly courage?"

"Becomes imperious rudeness."

"And modest diffidence?"

"Turns to fawning humility."

"And noble pride?"

"To vulgar haughtiness."

"And readiness to oblige?"

"Becomes a habit of too ready friendship and servility."

"Dear aunt, you make me almost angry. My future husband can never degenerate thus. He has one virtue which will preserve him as he is forever. A deep sense, an indestructible feeling for everything that is great and good and noble, dwells in his bosom. And this delicate susceptibility to all that is noble dwells in me also, I hope, as well as in him. This is the innate pledge and security for our happiness."

"But if it should grow old with you; if it should change to hateful excitability; and excitability is the worst enemy of matrimony. You both possess sensibility. That I do not deny; but beware lest this grace should degenerate into an irritable and quarrelsome mortal."

"Ah, dearest, if I might never become old! I could then be sure that my husband would never cease to love me."

"Thou art greatly in error, dear child! Wert thou always as fresh and beautiful as to-day, still thy husband's eye would by custom of years become indifferent to these advantages. Custom is the greatest enchantress in the world, and in the house one of the most benevolent of fairies. She renders that which is the most beautiful, as well as the ugliest, familiar. A wife is young, and becomes old; it is custom which hinders the husband from perceiving the change. On the contrary, did she remain young, while he became old, it might bring consequences, and render the man in years jealous. It is better as kind Providence has ordered it. Imagine that thou hadst grown to be an old woman, and thy husband

were a blooming youth; how wouldst thou then feel?"

Louise rubbed her chin, and said, "I cannot tell."

Her aunt continued: "But I will call thy attention to a secret which"—

"That is it," interrupted Louise, hastily, "that is it which I long so much to hear."

Her aunt said: "Listen to me attentively. What I now tell thee, I have proved. It consists of two parts. The first part, of the means to render a marriage happy, of itself prevents every possibility of dissension, and would even at last make the spider and the fly the best of friends with each other. The second part is the best and surest method of preserving feminine attractions."

"Ah!" exclaimed Louise.

"The former half of the means, then: In the first solitary hour after the ceremony, take thy bridegroom, and demand a solemn vow of him, and give him a solemn vow in return. Promise one another sacredly, *never, not even in mere jest, to wrangle with each other; never to bandy words or indulge in the least ill-humor. Never!* I say; never. Wrangling, even in jest, and putting on an air of ill-humor merely to tease, becomes earnest by practice. Mark that! Next promise each other, sincerely and solemnly, *never to have a secret from each other under whatever pretext, with whatever excuse it may be. You must, continually and every moment, see clearly into each other's bosom. Even when one of you has committed a fault, wait not an instant, but confess it freely—let it cost tears, but confess it. And as you keep nothing secret from each other. so, on the contrary, preserve the privacies of your house, marriage state and heart, from father, mother, sister, brother, aunt, and all the world. You two, with God's help, build your own quiet world. Every third or fourth one whom you draw into it with you, will form a party, and stand between you two! That should never be. Promise this to each other. Renew the vow at each temptation. You will find your account in it. Your souls will grow as it were together, and at last will become as one. Ah, if many a young pair had on their wedding day known this simple secret, and straightway practised it, how many marriages were happier than, alas, they are!"*

Louise kissed her aunt's hand with ardor. "I feel that it must be so. Where this confidence is absent, the married, even after wedlock, are two strangers who do not know each other. It should be so; without this, there can be no happiness. And now, aunt, the best preservative of female beauty?"

Her aunt smiled, and said: "We may not conceal from ourselves that a handsome man pleases us a hundred times more than an ill-looking one, and the men are pleased with us when we are pretty. But what we call beautiful, what in the men pleases us, and in us pleases the men, is not skin and hair, and shape and color, as in a picture or a statue; but it is the character, it is the soul that is within these, which enchants us by looks and words, earnestness, and joy, and sorrow. The men admire us the more they suppose

those virtues of the mind to exist in us which the outside promises; and we think a malicious man disagreeable, however graceful and handsome he may be. Let a young maiden, then, who would preserve her beauty, preserve but that purity of soul, those sweet qualities of the mind, those virtues, in short, by which she first drew her lover to her feet. And the best preservative of virtue, to render it unchanging and keep it ever young, is religion, that inward union with the Deity and eternity and faith—is piety, that walking with God, so pure, so peaceful, so beneficent to mortals.

"See, dear heart," continued the aunt, "there are virtues which arise out of mere experience. These grow old with time, and alter, because, by change of circumstances and inclination, prudence alters her means of action, and because her growth does not always keep pace with that of our years and passions. But religious virtues can never change; these remain eternally the same, because our God is always the same, and that eternity the same, which we and those who love us are hastening to enter. Preserve, then, a mind innocent and pure, looking for everything from God; thus will that beauty of soul remain, for which thy bridegroom to-day adores thee. I am no bigot, no fanatic: I am thy aunt of seven and twenty. I love all innocent and rational amusements. But for this very reason I say to thee—be a dear, good Christian, and thou wilt as a mother; yes, as a grandmother, be still beautiful."

Louise threw her arms about her neck, and wept in silence, and whispered, "I thank thee, angel!"